

Comprehensive Strategy Goals

Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS) embraces all vertebrate species known to exist in Montana, including both game and nongame species, as well as some invertebrate species (freshwater mussels and crayfish). In the early years of fish and wildlife management, the focus was clearly placed on game animals and their related habitats. This focus was, and continues to be, a result of almost all of the agency's funding being provided by hunters and anglers. Although FWP has no intention of reducing the attention focused on important game species, it is apparent that effective conservation actions directed to particular community types will benefit a variety of game and nongame species. As a result, FWP believes that with this new funding mechanism and conservation strategy in place, managing fish and wildlife more comprehensively is a natural progression in the effective conservation of the remarkable fish and wildlife resources of Montana.

Although game species are included in the Strategy, its priority is to describe those species and their related habitats that are in greatest conservation need. "In greatest conservation need" is interpreted to mean focus areas, community types, and species that are significantly degraded or declining, federally listed, or where important distribution and occurrence information to assess the status of individuals and/or groups of species is lacking. Because management of game species has been largely successful over the last 100 years, most have populations that are stable or increasing, and fewer were identified as in greatest conservation need (49 nongame, 11 game).

The methods and databases developed as part of this planning process are powerful tools that could be used in the future to help integrate other fish and wildlife management priorities as they are established. For this particular iteration of the Strategy, the following goals were developed:

- Identify all of Montana's fish and wildlife and related habitats in greatest need of conservation, and meet all eight requirements of WCRP and SWG
- Identify management strategies to conserve fish and wildlife and related habitats in greatest need
- Work independently and in partnership to conserve, enhance, and protect Montana's diverse fish and wildlife resources, and address each species equitably regardless of classification as game or nongame, rare or "at risk"
- Improve FWP's ability to address present and future funding challenges and opportunities
- Integrate monitoring and management of game and nongame fish and wildlife species

Eight Required Elements

Congress identified the required elements of this Strategy in the WCRP legislation, and the USFWS adopted those same elements as a condition of receiving WCRP and SWG funds.

1. Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations, as the state management agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the state's wildlife.
2. Descriptions of locations and the relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to the conservation of species identified in (1).
3. Descriptions of problems that may adversely affect species or their habitats identified in (1) and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors that may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats.
4. Descriptions of conservation actions determined to be necessary to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions.
5. Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions.
6. Descriptions of procedures to review the Comprehensive Strategy at intervals not to exceed ten years.
7. Plans for coordinating, to the extent feasible, the development, implementation, review, and revision of the Strategy with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the state or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.
8. Congress has affirmed through WCRP and SWG and other guidance to FWP and our partners that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing this Strategy, the projects that are carried out while this Strategy is being developed, and the species in greatest need of conservation that Congress has indicated such programs and projects are intended to address.

International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Guidelines

In addition to the eight Congressional requirements, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) established supplemental guidelines to assist with Strategy development (Appendix A). These guidelines provided recommendations within four areas: 1) planning process and partnerships, 2) focus and scope, 3) format and content, and 4) completion, outcomes, and availability. FWP's CFWCS planning team used all of these guidelines in the creation of this document.

Planning Approach

Technical and Steering Committees

Development of the Strategy was guided by a steering committee and a technical committee. The technical committee served in an advisory capacity to the steering committee. Steering committee members guided the planning process including approach to the public and outside agency involvement; allocation of funds (Appendices B, C, and D) approval of methods and results for identifying habitats, species, and survey and inventory priorities; and internal preparation for implementation of the Strategy.

Steering Committee

Chris Smith	Chief of Staff
Larry Peterman	Chief of Field Operations
Ron Aashiem	Administrator of Conservation and Education
Mike Aderhold	Regional Supervisor
Don Childress	Administrator of Wildlife Division
Chris Hunter	Administrator of Fisheries Division

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** Provide policy-level direction and oversight to development of FWP's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy and use of SWG funds; approve projects to be funded with SWG; and allocate SWG funds and FWP matching funds to support projects.

Technical Committee

Janet Hess-Herbert	Information Management Unit Leader
T.O. Smith	Fish and Wildlife Conservation Planning Coordinator
Adam Brooks	Federal Assistance Coordinator
Rebecca Cooper	Federal Assistance Specialist
Ken McDonald	Fisheries Management Bureau Chief
Tom Palmer	Information Bureau Chief
Jen Pelej	Information Specialist

Brad Schmitz
Jim Williams
Heidi Youmans
Graham Taylor

Regional Fisheries Manager
Regional Wildlife Manager
Nongame Bureau Chief
Regional Wildlife Manager

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** Assist in the development of FWP's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy; identify, evaluate, and prioritize potential SWG projects; recommend allocation of SWG funds to the steering committee; develop Applications for Federal Assistance (AFA, a document required to receive SWG funds) and other required project documentation, including interim and final reports; and monitor implementation of projects, including tracking budgets and expenditures.

Exploratory Groups

FWP Staff Exploratory Group

A group of FWP staff was assembled early in the planning process at the request of the technical and steering committees to develop ideas about the most effective way to develop Montana's Strategy that would meet all eight Congressional requirements (Appendix E).

FWP Law Enforcement Exploratory Group

Enforcement officers were brought together as an exploratory group, and they identified the ways that law enforcement could help implement the priorities identified by Montana's Strategy if Congress would allow some of future allocated SWG funding to be used for enforcement activities (Appendix F).

Agency and Non-Governmental Organization Exploratory Group

Before planning began, agencies and organizations that manage significant land and water areas or have significant control over these areas were invited to participate in an advisory group meeting led by Jeff Hagener, FWP director. The goal of this meeting was to identify what level of involvement each of these groups wanted to have during the development of the Strategy. All of the participants indicated that their respective agencies and organizations were interested in the Strategy, would like to be informed of progress on the Strategy, and would be willing to provide support as needed. Most participants indicated that they wanted to have the opportunity to review the Strategy prior to its submission to the USFWS (Appendix G).

Public Involvement

Public involvement is critical to development of the Strategy for Montana and will become even more important as FWP moves toward implementation. The first steps toward gaining public involvement in development of the Strategy were to hold an advisory group meeting and conduct a mail-back survey. The purpose of the advisory group meeting, held in October 2003, was to identify what level of involvement stakeholder organizations wanted to have during the Strategy development process. The survey, on the other hand, was administered by mail to randomly selected Montana residents. The goal was to learn their opinions on the types of comprehensive management that SWG funds promote (see Survey Discussion below). The information obtained was used to aid development of the Comprehensive Strategy and will help direct its implementation.

In addition to the advisory group and survey, other public involvement tools were used to involve partner groups, fish and wildlife enthusiasts, landowners, and more. As part of the Strategy review process, FWP held seven public meetings, one per region, where 49 attendees learned more about the Strategy and provided comments. Printed drafts and visual aids were available at the public meetings. In addition, online news pages were developed on the FWP website at www.fwp.mt.gov, under "Wild Things." Background information and the draft strategy were posted in a user-friendly format to facilitate review and comment. Press releases were issued regarding developments in SWG funding, the release of the draft Strategy for review, and its submittal for publication. All press releases were posted online as well. During the draft review, 59 FWP employees and 18 people either from the general public or representing organizations and other agencies submitted comments concerning the draft Strategy. Names and details of those commenting or attending meetings is available upon request.

After publication of the Strategy, extensive statewide outreach will occur. Outreach plans include print publications, educational materials and programs, press releases, online announcements, posters, magazine and television features, video, face-to-face communications, and more. Audiences will include elected officials (including county commissioners and board members), landowners, conservation groups, agricultural and industry interests, other government agencies, community leaders, tribes, educational institutions, fish and wildlife enthusiasts, hunters and anglers, media, etc. Montana's public involvement efforts also will be linked to a national information campaign, led by the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The Comprehensive Strategy is designed to be collaborative with local communities and partner groups. Efforts will be made to distribute as much information as possible, solicit and incorporate feedback, and develop support and involvement in the implementation of recommended actions.

SWG Survey

FWP conducted a mail survey of Montana residents during late summer of 2004 to learn their opinions about the types of comprehensive management that SWG promotes. The goals of the survey were to:

- Better understand what Montanans think about FWP conserving *all* fish and wildlife species in Montana
- Provide information that will aid development and future implementation of Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy

Mail-back surveys were administered to 10,500 randomly selected households across Montana, and a nearly 30 percent response rate to the survey was achieved.

Survey Discussion

Overall, the survey results suggest that most Montanans are supportive of FWP taking a broader role when it comes to managing the state's diverse fish and wildlife. A majority of the survey respondents (62 percent) reported that it is important or very important to them that FWP ensure there are healthy populations of nongame animals.

Implementing the Strategy will be the biggest challenge, and at this point in time, providing the appropriate level of nonfederal match is the biggest concern. This survey asked two key questions related to funding: 1) Are Montanans supportive of FWP using some monies obtained from hunters and anglers to help match federal SWG funding, and 2) Are Montanans willing to help pay for the conservation of nongame animals in ways other than by purchasing hunting and/or fishing licenses and equipment?

Results from the survey revealed that most Montanans are supportive (56 percent) of FWP using some monies obtained from hunters and anglers to help match federal SWG funding. However, there were a significant number (32 percent) of respondents who reported this to be unacceptable to them. Furthermore, only about half of the hunter and anglers identified in the survey found this to be acceptable to them. These findings suggest that while it is acceptable for FWP to use some hunter and angler license dollars for this purpose, the agency needs to act prudently in doing so and should keep hunters and anglers informed of how their license dollars are being used.

Regarding other potential sources of funding to help match federal SWG funding, a majority of the survey respondents (61 percent) said they would not be willing to help pay for the conservation of nongame animals in ways other than by purchasing hunting and/or fishing licenses and equipment. From the survey it

appears that most Montanans are supportive of FWP taking a broader role when it comes to managing the state's fish and wildlife. Yet, most are unwilling to help directly pay for this in ways other than by purchasing hunting and fishing licenses. The results of the survey confirmed that securing alternative funding will be a major challenge for implementation of Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy in the future. Additional research on this topic is recommended if FWP is to successfully take the steps necessary to fully meet the needs of a broader constituency.

The Four Components of Montana's Strategy

Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy is organized into four components. Component I, focus areas, guides attention to specific geographical areas of Montana that are in greatest need of conservation. Component II, community types, identifies habitats along with their related fish and wildlife that are in greatest need of conservation throughout Montana regardless of location. Often, fish and wildlife within a community type face similar conservation concerns. Addressing these concerns using community level conservation allows many species to comprehensively benefit from conservation strategies. However, some species' populations have declined so far, or are so specialized, that conservation strategies aimed at focus areas or community types might not be effective. Therefore, Component III identifies the 60 fish and wildlife species in greatest need of conservation. The conservation concerns for these species should be addressed specifically whether through broad- or fine-scale actions. Finally, there are many species and groups of species for which we do not have available adequate occurrence data in order to determine their status. Component IV provides a list of the species and groups of species that are in greatest need of inventory.

Component I: Geographic focus areas in the landscape that contain significant fish and wildlife communities (species and their associated habitats) that are identified as being in greatest need of conservation.

This is a strategy to focus resources and efforts toward geographical areas where they can benefit the largest number of species and communities in need of conservation.

Component II: Fish and wildlife community types that are in greatest need of conservation (seven identified).

This is a high-leverage strategy to address the conservation concerns of whole ecological communities or species groupings. Implementing conservation strategies at this level will comprehensively benefit many fish and wildlife species.

Component III: Fish and wildlife species that are in greatest need of conservation (60 identified).

These are species whose needs must be specifically addressed, whether through focus areas, community types, or individually..

Component IV: Species and groups of species to be targeted for inventory.

Over time, this Strategy will allow FWP to collect data 1) for species or species groups for which we do not have sufficient information to determine their level of conservation need, 2) for species that are important or are indicator species for the health of certain communities, or 3) for species used as measures of success in a comprehensive approach to fish and wildlife management.

Categorizing the Levels of Conservation Need

Within each component, focus areas, community types, and species were prioritized into three tiers, based on their level of conservation need. Likewise, all species were prioritized for inventory needs using similar definitions. Please review the Methods section of the Strategy to understand how tiers were calculated for focus areas, communities, species, and inventory needs.

Tier I: Greatest conservation need. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has a clear obligation to use its resources to implement conservation actions that provide direct benefit to these species, communities, and focus areas.

Tier II: Moderate conservation need. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks could use its resources to implement conservation actions that provide direct benefit to these species, communities, and focus areas.

Tier III: Lower conservation need. Although important to Montana's wildlife diversity, these species, communities, and focus areas are either abundant and widespread or are believed to have adequate conservation already in place.

Tier IV: Species that are non-native, incidental, or on the periphery of their range and are either expanding or very common in adjacent states.

How To Navigate This Strategy

Most users will be interested in particular components of the Strategy. Readers should decide if they are interested in landscape level conservation, a particular community type, or a specific species.

If You Are Interested in Landscape or Community Scale Conservation

Refer to the Table of Contents and directly reference the ecotype (Component I) or the community type (Component II) that you are interested in. For example, if you are interested in montane forests of western Montana, use the Table of Contents to locate Montane Forest Ecotype, and there you will find listed all individual focus areas under that ecotype. On the other hand, if you are interested in the riparian and wetland community type, refer to the Table of Contents under Component II and proceed to the appropriate page. Within the focus areas and community types, you will find descriptions and a map of the area or type, the fish and wildlife and habitats associated with each, and conservation concerns and strategies, as well as references to selected management plans.

If You Are Interested in Species Scale Conservation

If you are interested in a particular fish or wildlife species, you can use the Table of Contents and look under Component III to locate the page number for any Tier I species you are interested in. You can also use the Species Index (Page 640) and locate the page numbers for any species in the Strategy, regardless of tier. Tables for the focus areas, community types, and inventory needs associated with a species can also provide additional information such as lists of other species that are associated comprehensively with similar areas or community types.

If You Are Interested in Inventory

Proceed directly to the fourth component of the Strategy. Species groups and individual species that are in greatest need of inventory are listed taxonomically. Once you have found the species or group of interest, coded symbols are provided to the right of that species or group that indicate some of the reasons why they are in greatest need. A legend for these codes is provided at the beginning of the Component IV listings.

How This Strategy Works

When fully implemented, this Strategy is intended to be dynamic and is based on the concept that fine-scale information for any of Montana's species will be used to continually refine and adjust the classification for that species when appropriate. This will be accomplished using the inventory component of the Strategy. In turn, modifications to the list of species in greatest need of conservation should help redirect priorities in terms of the most at-risk community types. This information will then be used to direct attention to new geographical areas of Montana and help focus the delivery of the appropriate conservation efforts that help address the most critical areas, where possible. FWP has made every effort to use existing management plans to describe the conservation

concerns and strategies for focus areas, community types, and species. In this way the Strategy attempts to tie together many different plans at different levels in order to facilitate collaboration. A full list of conservation and management plans can be found in Table 1.

Implementing Montana's Comprehensive Strategy

Each of the focus areas, community types, species, and inventory needs along with their conservation concerns and strategies are the conservation priorities for Montana. If a focus area, community type, or species is identified as Tier I in this strategy it can be assumed that their current status is low, declining or imperiled. No conservation strategy identified in this document was singled out as more or less important than any other, because successful conservation of the species and habitats in greatest need will require addressing all of these concerns over time. In addition, singling out certain objectives at the strategic level reduces the flexibility of FWP and its partners to take advantage of conservation opportunities as they occur.

Several challenges must be met in order to successfully implement Montana's Conservation Strategy. First, because the document was developed at the strategic level following Congressional guidance, the conservation concerns and strategies that have been identified are intentionally broad in scope and will need to be further developed at the operational level as the Strategy is implemented. Second, SWG funding is allocated annually, and the amounts have so far been insufficient to fully implement the scope of this Strategy. In addition, the unstable nature of funding serves as a roadblock that could prevent FWP and its partners from committing to long-term projects. We anticipate that this funding status will remain the same in the near future.

These challenges will be met in several ways. Following the submission of Montana's Strategy to the USFWS, FWP and its partners will develop an Action Plan within the year that is operational in nature and that targets the Tier I focus areas, community types, species, and inventory needs that offer the greatest opportunity for leveraging our collective resources. These targets will be selected while considering the immediacy of conservation needs and the limited and varying nature of SWG funding. The conservation targets that are selected will have an operational plan developed that details specific priorities, objectives, actions, and responsibilities of FWP and its partners that will be accomplished prior to the next scheduled revision of the Strategy. In this way, FWP and its partners can more realistically narrow the vast conservation needs of Montana's species and habitats to more accurately reflect the available levels of SWG funding and ongoing conservation efforts that can be leveraged.